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How a Global Trip Inspired This Californian to Focus Locally



Mark Lundy

As a graduate student, Mark Lundy (far left) worked with Chimwemwe (second from right) and colleagues in Malawi on a tomato production project in 2012.

The United States has always been a world leader in the fight to end hunger and poverty. This spring, our partners share how [recent efforts embody the best of the United States](#) and why this leadership matters. The following is a guest post authored by Mark Lundy, who traveled to Malawi as a graduate student to work on an agricultural development project. Mark is now a cooperative extension farm advisor in California.

Having grown up in a city, my interest in agriculture was largely something that developed after I left home. As an undergraduate student and in the years afterward, I was lucky to have the opportunity to study and work in China, Ireland and Mexico.

As diverse as these locations were geographically, culturally and linguistically, something that unified these experiences for me was that in each place I ended up working and interacting with farmers in rural areas. In the process, I became increasingly interested in learning about rural livelihoods and how they were changing in a rapidly globalizing world economy. Eventually, this motivated me to dive into the agricultural sciences. I began working on farms and ultimately earned a master's degree in international agricultural development and a doctorate in agronomy from the University of California, Davis.

It was during the course of my graduate work at UC Davis that I participated in the [Trellis program](#), which partners graduate students in the United States with agricultural research and outreach organizations in the developing world. Run by the [Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Collaborative Research on Horticulture](#), the Trellis program's objective is to share expertise and foster cross-cultural collaborations in agricultural development.

When I applied to participate in Trellis, I was mid-stream in my graduate work and eager to put my “book learning” to some practical use. I was also curious to see how the more detailed understanding of agricultural production I had been gaining largely in the context of Californian agriculture would apply to a rural, developing world setting more similar to those that had initiated my vocation.

Collaborating in Malawi

I was partnered with the Bvumbwe Agricultural Research Station outside of Blantyre, Malawi, whose Trellis project focus was to disseminate improved production practices for small-scale farmers growing fresh-market tomatoes. Our collaboration consisted of compiling region-specific best practices with visual aids into poster handouts and organizing on-farm field demonstrations of best management practices. Trellis provided part of the funding for me to travel to Malawi to participate in some of the field demonstrations.

One of my colleagues during the project was an agronomist named Chimwemwe, who had been educated in the area and possessed both fundamental agronomic knowledge and a nuanced understanding of agricultural production in his region. He had good relationships with leaders in the farming communities we visited and he was well respected among his colleagues at the research station. During my time in Malawi, he and I discussed cropping system innovations such as conservation agriculture, the feasibility and constraints of organic production systems, and possibilities for tomato processing and composting operations.

I was impressed with Chimwemwe’s know-how and, simultaneously, frustrated by the resource constraints that confined the possibility of his impact.

Even though we successfully accomplished the Trellis project objectives, I remember thinking that as much as I valued what I was learning from the experience, the money invested in my plane ticket might have been better spent directly on Chimwemwe’s programs. How much more might he have accomplished beyond the objectives of the project with those resources in hand?

Getting Sharper

In the years following my participation in Trellis, I finished my graduate work and became an [agronomy advisor](#) for the University of California Cooperative Extension, part of the Agriculture and Natural Resources division. In that role, I provide agronomic expertise to farmers and lead applied research and extension programs for a wide range of crops (including tomatoes!) in the lower Sacramento Valley. My decision to work in this role was partly informed by my participation in Trellis and my interactions with Chimwemwe.

Seeing Chimwemwe’s extension program in action underscored to me that agriculture is simultaneously (even paradoxically) a global and a local enterprise. Many of the fundamentals of cropping systems do apply broadly across diverse agricultural landscapes, which is what permitted the productive conversations and collaboration between us.

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Nevertheless, there is no substitute for a nuanced understanding of the particular contours and constraints of any given region or farm. Despite my broad knowledge of cropping systems, Chimwemwe’s relationships with individuals in his region and his understanding of the particular constraints to production on the farms he was serving made him a sharper tool for the job we set out to do together.

With a few years’ perspective, I can now see that the project was successful beyond its immediate goal of extending best management practices to small-scale tomato growers in Malawi. Observing Chimwemwe in action inspired me to leverage the regionally specific knowledge I had gained about California agriculture during my graduate education and try to become a similarly sharp tool in my own backyard.

As a result, my Trellis experience continues to bear fruit in my day-to-day work right here in California.

Editor’s Note: Fourteen graduate students from UC Davis, North Carolina State University and the University of Florida are currently working on new Trellis Fund projects in nine countries as part of Feed the Future. Follow their work by [visiting the Feed the Future Horticulture Innovation Lab’s website](#).

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- [Hope for Ending Hunger](#)
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